

Leadership across international borders: A case study of an environmental leader

Abstract

This paper focuses on the story of a well-respected leader known for his tireless work in promoting and preserving the environment both within Australia and internationally. It highlights the contextual factors that have influenced and continue to influence his thinking about leadership as well as the key values he embodies as a leader. The paper begins by considering some of the salient leadership literature in the field. The next part of the paper reviews the qualitative methodology that steered the research for this paper. Following on, the paper provides a snapshot of the life forces and context that played an important role in shaping the leader's views and practices. Finally, the paper provides an analytical discussion of the leader's practices in the light of two well-known leadership frameworks.

Introduction

Leadership has been the subject of much discussion and debate amongst practitioners and academics alike over hundreds if not thousands of years yet it remains an elusive term (Burns, 1978). It seems that while there are many theories of leadership emanating from an array of academic discipline perspectives and research, there has been less investigation into what constitutes leadership from the experiences of leaders working across diverse fields. Apart from individual biographies of famous leaders, there have been few studies that have concentrated on leaders' experiences of leadership.

This paper is part of a larger research study which seeks to examine the phenomenon of leadership from the viewpoints of several well-recognised Australian leaders across a variety of fields such as politics, the environment, sport, business, the community, and the arts. The story of a highly well-recognised environmental leader is "case studied" to identify the driving life-forces that affected his conceptions of leadership and to identify his beliefs about leadership and how he enacted those conceptions and beliefs in practice. The paper begins by a discussion of some of the theoretical literature in the field. It then moves on to outline the qualitative research methodology that steered the research. Following this is a discussion of the story of the leader whose work is featured in the paper.

Theoretical Frameworks

It is over thirty years ago that Katz and Kahn (1966) observed that leadership is a "slippery concept". (p. 301). It defies simple definition and many different views and perspectives about what constitutes effective leadership performance and practice have been debated in the literature. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review effectively this vast and comprehensive literature. For this reason, only two key theoretical frameworks that have considerable potential for interpreting the individual leader's story "case studied" here are discussed. It is important to acknowledge at the outset of this paper that we are well aware, and understand the power of, some of the contemporary competing theories of leadership that maintain leadership is a shared activity and not the province of an individual (see for example, House & Aditja, 1997; Limerick, Cunningham & Crowther, 2002; Pearce & Conger, 2003). However, we are aware also that there are some individual leaders who deserve to be singled out for attention to and analysis of the originality of their vision and their tireless drive in inspiring others to share that vision. The leader whose work is considered in this paper is one such person.

The two key frameworks of interest that have relevance for this paper are by Leavy (2003) and Kouzes and Posner (2002). Leavy (2003) puts forward a framework known as the "the

great leadership triad” which consists of the key constructs of context, conviction and credibility or the three “c’s” of leadership. The first “c”, *context* in which leadership emerges, defines the opportunities that are available and created. Context is therefore important in shaping leadership practices and behaviour. Gronn’s (1999) work in the field of leadership is relevant here because it helps to tease out what is understood by context and the opportunities the context creates for leaders. Gronn (1999) explains leadership by taking a career perspective which involves not only a recognition of the wider contextual factors that shape a leader’s action but also consideration of sequential phases that constitute leadership a career. Of particular interest here is the notion of the contextual factors or life forces that influence a leader’s practices and views.

The second “c”, *conviction*, refers to imagination, vision and drive that are essential for leadership. Much of the leadership literature discusses the importance of a leader having as well as communicating a clear vision (Wheatley, 1999). Yet, conviction means not only having the vision and desire to make a difference, underpinned by strong values, and a purpose, but also the know-how, will and energy to make it happen (Leavy, 2003). As Leavy (2003) maintains, “having the opportunity to make an impact ... is not the same as making one”. (p. 57). A challenge facing leaders, then, is the ongoing need for sharing the vision or conviction with others and enlisting their support and personal commitment to achieve it. The third “c”, *credibility*, is identified as the dynamic currency of leadership. Because credibility is dependent upon performance it can be created or destroyed very quickly. Lack of credibility can emerge when leaders’ spirits become tired, their stories get old or their followers have either too much or too little faith in their ability (Leavy, 2003).

The leadership model proposed by Kouzes and Posner (1990, 2002) draws upon what might be considered the best elements of the myriad of leadership theories to emerge over the past decades. These authors identify five key leadership practices that include *model the way*, *inspire a shared vision*, *challenge the process*, *enable others to act*, and *encourage the heart*. According to the authors, *model the way* refers to the need for leaders to model the behaviour they expect of others if they want to gain commitment and achieve success. *Inspire a shared vision* refers to the importance of having a vision and inventing a future based around it. This involves leaders committing to it and enlisting others to share that vision. *Challenge the process* refers to leaders who search for opportunities to change the status quo, to take risks and experiment. *Enabling others to act* recognises that achieving goals requires team effort. Collaboration and trust are key ideas here. Finally, *encourage the heart* is concerned with recognising the achievements and contributions of others and celebrating successes in a spirit of community (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). What underpins each of these five leadership practices is the people side of what leadership is about.

In some ways there are many points of convergence between Leavy’s (2003) triad of leadership and Kouzes and Posner’s (2002) five practices. For example, Leavy’s notion of conviction encompasses most if not all of the five exemplary practices with obvious links to sharing the vision, challenging the process and enabling others to act. Modelling the way is related to Leavy’s construct of “credibility” since credibility is heavily contingent upon the example leaders set and their leadership performance and behaviour. The importance of the role of context (Leavy, 2003; Gronn, 1999) in developing and nurturing leadership and providing opportunities for it to flourish adds an important dimension to this discussion. There are obvious conceptual links across the two leadership models or frames chosen here. These links are illustrated further in the discussion later in the paper.

The next section of this paper discusses the methodology which steered the research study.

Researching the leadership story - methodology

The methodology for this research comprised a semi-structured in-depth interview with the particular leader of interest. This interview data was complemented by some relevant document review. Interview methodology was deemed the most appropriate data-gathering method since it enables participants to reflect upon and make sense of their experiences (Seidman, 1991). Interviews also have the benefit of collecting large amounts of data about participants' perspectives relatively quickly and permit immediate follow-up and clarification of issues (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Relevant documentation about the leader including information from websites and newspaper clippings, was also reviewed to augment the interview data (Yin, 1989). The semi-structured interview was designed around a set of key issues outlined in an aide-memoir and made available to the leader prior to the interview process (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1990). The leader permitted the interview to be tape recorded. Notes were taken during the interview and the transcript was returned for his checking and endorsement. For the analysis, procedures outlined by Marton (1988) were followed. For example, comments were brought together into categories on the basis of their similarities and categories being differentiated from one another in terms of their variances. The theoretical constructs noted earlier in the literature discussion were used to assist in the interpretation of the themes that emerged from the data analysis. The next part of the paper introduces the leader and following this is a discussion of his leadership practices and views in line with the theoretical constructs discussed previously.

Introducing Ian Kiernan, environmental leader

The leader case studied in this paper is Ian Kiernan, Chairperson of Clean Up Australia and Clean Up the World, a grass roots community based not-for profit organisation whose major goal is to "*clean and fix up*" the environment. Starting small in 1989, the first clean up event was organised for Sydney Harbour, Australia. An astounding 40 000 volunteers participated by removing all types of rubbish littering the natural environment. Based on the overwhelming public support for the Sydney experience, the following year saw the campaign go national and the Clean Up Australia Day event was born. More than 300 000 Australians volunteered in the first year. Since then, it is estimated that more than 7 million Australians have been involved in Clean Up Australia Days, and other organised clean up days including Friday Schools Clean Up days and Business Clean ups (Clean Up Australia, <http://www.cleanup.com.au/Main.asp?Requesttype=Doc&DocID=63&CatID=3>, 2004). The movement became global in 1993 when Clean Up Australia signed an agreement with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to manage and promote its programmes. The first Clean Up the World campaign took place in September 1993 and more than 30 million people in 80 countries participated in this community based event. To date, some 40 million people from more than 120 countries in the world engage in cleaning up their streets, waters, parks and other areas (Clean Up Australia, <http://www.cleanup.com.au/Main.asp?Requesttype=Doc&DocID=63&CatID=3>, 2004). In addition to organising national clean up days, Clean Up Australia under Ian Kiernan's skilful leadership has been and continues to be involved in a raft of projects and activities that centre on improving waste and resource management in Australia and abroad. Some of these are small ranging in value of a couple of thousand dollars while others are up to the value of millions of dollars. Ian has received many accolades for his work. For instance, for his contribution to the environment internationally, he was made a United Nations Environment Programme Global 500 Laureate and was recipient of the prestigious United Nations Environment Programme Sasakawa Environment prize in 1998.

Context

Ian Kiernan was born in 1940 in Australia around about the same time that his father went to war. During WWII, his father was a prisoner at Changi and endured the forced labour of Burma Road. After the war, he was stationed in London where he ran the buying office for GJ

Coles. For Ian and his sister, this meant many years spent in boarding school. After completing school, Ian worked for his father, who at this time owned an import / export business. After a couple of years, Ian left the family business and took a number of positions including a cadetship with a concrete company before he set himself up in business. At the age of 23, he established his own building business which saw him constructing factories and undertaking renovations. Starting small he began buying property, including houses and a factory. Using his property management skills, he purchased old cottages in East Sydney, bringing them back to life and selling them for enormous profits. At one time he had “*nearly 500 terrace houses*”, not to mention “*4 major blocks*”, “*a string of restaurants*” and personal assets including a house and boat. A change in direction saw him take a year off where he sailed to the 36 most exotic islands in the world and spent much time on his own. The experience “*delivered [him] an incredible freedom*” and underscored the point that “*there were much more valuable qualities out there in life*” apart from money.

Two critical experiences in Ian Kiernan’s life or life forces that were catalysts for his crusade in environmental protection and preservation of oceans occurred during sailing competitions. The first of these was the influence of a fellow competitor who “*encouraged us [the competitors from 11 nations in the world] .. to hold our plastics on board to demonstrate to the 30 000 school kids that were studying the race ... just how much plastic we might have thrown in the world’s oceans and had not*”. It is important to realise that at the time of the race, there were no international agreements about marine pollution or the dumping of plastics or other rubbish into the seas. Ian Kiernan noted that this experience brought about a tremendous change in the way he viewed the oceans and challenged many ingrained practices he developed as a child that taught him it was perfectly natural and acceptable to “*throw rubbish off the back of the boat*”.

A second and related experience was sailing through the Sargasso Sea, renowned for its golden seaweed, in the South Atlantic. As a child, Kiernan had read a fable about “*an imaginary bird called the Halycon bird [that] used to charm the sea to calm and ... land on the golden seaweed, lay its eggs, raise its fledglings*”. Yet, the sight he witnessed was a stark and appalling contrast. While he saw “*the start of ... huge clumps of golden seaweed*”, scattered amongst it were items such as, “*a broken plastic bucket, a floating rubber thong ... a plastic bag, a floating empty toothpaste tube, cigarette lighter*”. Kiernan’s reaction of absolute disdain and disgust propelled him to do something about it. As he said, “*that [the witnessing of the marine pollution] was the trigger and I said, ‘enough! When I get home I’m going to do something about Sydney Harbour in my own backyard’*”. Cleaning up Sydney Harbour was the first project; many others have followed since then. Thus, it was against a backdrop of Kiernan’s own awakening of the intensity of the pollution in the seas that his “issue” (Gronn, 1999) or vision was born and took shape. It provided an opportunity for him to exercise his leadership skills and leadership agenda (Leavy, 2003) by establishing a non-political, grass roots organisation - Clean Up Australia and later Clean Up the World. Leavy (2003) and Gronn (1999) remind us that leadership does not exist within a political, social, economic or time vacuum; leaders are born at particular timeframes in history into a particular society or community. Leaders are products of their environment and their era, shaped by it and as agents shaped by it. Since the late 1980s, Kiernan’s activism has seen him playing a significant role in shaping the national and international environmental context in which he is a leader.

Conviction and Credibility

Ian Kiernan as a visionary and tireless worker for Clean Up Australia and Clean Up the World is a person who has shown considerable conviction and credibility (Leavy, 2003). The next part of his story provides illustrations of how he has demonstrated that conviction and attained that credibility. Each of Kouzes and Posner’s (2002) exemplary practices - challenging the

process, modelling the way, inspiring a shared vision and enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart are considered.

Challenging the process

As alluded to earlier, it was Kiernan's love of the sea and his strong anger at its unhealthy and polluted state that was an important factor in mobilising him towards action. Yet to mobilise a social movement requires innovative ways to bring about change, risk-taking and experimentation (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Kiernan's early journey saw him seeking help from influential friends and colleagues who had expertise in marketing and communications. He also consulted a couple of prominent politicians to endorse the idea in principle. While the first politician did little to facilitate the idea, he didn't give up, but simply sought the endorsement of another. Kiernan stated that his motto, is "*I will not be beaten*". "*No*" from others is a word that makes him more determined and motivated to succeed. He explained that he is "*a great one for sticking [his] neck out*" and finds that he thrives on challenge. He reflected on his life where he saw a clear pattern emerging which shows him taking on one challenge, and then another; with each challenge becoming bigger and more complex. For example, the first clean up campaign commenced in Sydney Harbour, Australia, in 1989, and by the following year it had gone national. A couple of years later, Clean Up the World was launched.

Inspiring a shared vision

Kiernan admitted that one of his qualities is having the ability to see opportunities and seize them. As he said, "*I've got a nose*". It is evident that he has used "his nose" and other senses effectively over the years to seek these out and exploit them. As it turned out, his idea of cleaning up and enlisting the moral and physical support of the general public was a huge success, more so than he thought was imaginable as he said, "*there was still nobody more surprised than me to see the scale that turned out on the first day*".

He offered this explanation as to why the idea went down so well:

It's very wholesome, it's apolitical, it's not for profit and it's only got one agenda: that is to clean up and fix up... It's not confrontational in a physical way. But at the same time, it is its own form of protest. Just by getting out there and cleaning up, people are protesting about the state of the environment in a positive proactive way. And it's owned by the people, we simply manage it for them. They own it. And we happened on a really good formula.

An important part of Kiernan's work is his ability to communicate his ideas to others, to engage them in the issue and to enlist their support whether it be in principle, in kind or via some other means. Since the inception of Clean Up Australia, Ian has developed many personal and powerful networks, consisting of not only treasured and influential friends, but also influential colleagues, many of whom are national and international political figures. It seems likely that without these significant partners and strong networks, Clean Up Australia and Clean Up the World would not be able to take on and conquer challenges of such magnitude. He commented that "*we've got a power, we've definitely got a power but we treat it with the absolute respect and we're very careful about how we use it*". It seems that politicians take his telephone calls because of Clean Up's reputation for finding practical solutions to difficult problems. Kiernan recounted a story told by a senior minister in the Australian Commonwealth Government who said,

I have people coming into my office all the time with these grand plans and huge budgets. He [Kiernan] comes in and says, 'Here's the plan, we're three quarters of the way through it, I just need a bit more and can we do it'? I say yes and then it happens.

Modelling the way

Modelling the way refers to leaders living their values, beliefs and principles in practice, sharing these with others by setting a good example (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Significantly, Kiernan acknowledged that he modelled the way when he said, *“I think I lead from the front ... I tend to put myself at the head of the column, but I think that probably comes from a practical background”*. To explain this he used the analogy of boating: *“you’ve got to be practical or else your boat sinks or you come last or both”*. He went on to say that a good boatsperson *“has a special standing there within the community because [others] know that he can or she can handle a boat in a difficult task of loading passengers or cargo or fishing or all the rest of it”*. In other words, a leader is a person who has credibility and know-how in the eyes of followers because he or she has the practical prowess and competence to achieve the goals or realise the vision (Leavy, 2003). The effectiveness of the Clean Up campaign would indicate that Kiernan is a highly competent and credible leader.

Enabling others to act

While appearing to be Captain of the Clean Up Australia ship, Ian indicated that he is very much a *“team player”* who values the work and contribution of others. This lies at the essence of Kouzes and Posner’s (2002) notion of “enabling others to act”. Kiernan used terms such as *“mateship”* and *“peer respect”* to describe the collaborative relationships he has enjoyed with staff (women and men) in his employ in previous jobs and in his current position as Chairperson of Clean Up Australia and Clean Up the World. He referred to a strong and enthusiastic team, comprising many young and talented graduates, all committed and hard working to the cause of cleaning up the environment who work closely with him. He admitted that not all of the ideas for projects are his own; he said that he gets good ideas from forums, conferences, contacts and meeting *“really smarter people”* who work for and with him. His view of leadership resonated with that of House and Aditja (1997) who argued that *“leadership involves collaborative relationships that lead to a collective action grounded in shared values of people who work together to effect positive change”*. (p. 457)

Interestingly, Kiernan commented that the Board of Clean Up Australia described him as *“being Clean up Australia”* since he is its driving force and a pivotal figure who continues not only to set the vision, liaise with key players from governments of every persuasion both here and abroad, but also gets his hands dirty in the process. Kiernan mused that his leadership strength is also a weakness given the long-term sustainability of the organisation without his input. He recognised that a challenge for the future is to *“bring somebody in”* to work closely with him, learn the ropes and infiltrate the networks, so the legacy can be carried on, not that Ian gave any indication of wishing to retire. In making this observation about succession planning for the campaign, Ian acknowledged one of the often noted criticisms of leadership bordering on that of a charismatic nature (see Gronn, 2002), namely, what happens after the outstanding individual leaves the leadership position?

Encouraging the heart

Ian gives the impression that he is a servant leader (Sergiovanni, 1992). Not afraid to do the dirty work, and model the way (Kouzes & Posner, 2002), he stated that to date he has attended 98 launches of Clean Up days in capital cities and regional towns throughout Australia. He meets and works with local people across many communities who time and time again appreciate the opportunity to do their part. Of these people, he said, *“you give them a bit of a hand up [and] they pour the earth for you”*. He gave an example of a planned trip to Kimberley, Western Australia, where the *“bad behaviour of tourists”* has contributed detrimentally to the natural environment. He said, *“I’m going to really lend them a hand. I’ve got to fly three quarters of the way around Australia to do it, but I cannot not do it. And I*

guess that is leadership in itself". An important characteristic of "encouraging the heart" (Kouzes & Posner, 2002) is the practice of encouraging and supporting people in challenging times. Kiernan's hands-on involvement in the organisation is one way in which he encourages the heart. There is little doubt that his motivation comes from his passion and unwavering belief in the cause that has driven much of his life across recent decades.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an insight into the beliefs and practices of a successful leader who has made a significant contribution to mobilising millions of people across the world to take responsibility for preserving, respecting and protecting the environment. Constructs from two theoretical frameworks (Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Leavy, 2003) were utilised to interpret his story a little more fully. A limitation of this paper is that it provided a mere snapshot of Kiernan's leadership story and life. From what Kiernan says, it appears that there are many more chapters in his leadership book that have yet to be written and there are many environmental battles that need to be won. Kiernan remains optimistic and fiercely committed to the environmental cause despite being knowledgeable of what would appear to be insurmountable global problems. His optimism is admirable and his message is strong:

'we [Clean up Australia] see it as our job to inspire communities – individuals, families, governments and businesses – to take responsibility and be actively involved in making their part of the world a cleaner and healthier place to live'
(<http://www.cleanup.com.au>).

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